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# The Development of an English Antislavery Identity in the Eighteenth Century

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Claremont McKenna College

**The Development of an English Antislavery Identity in the Eighteenth Century**

submitted to  
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and  
Dean Peter Uvin

By  
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for  
Senior Thesis  
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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction .....	5
Chapter I: Culture of Slavery.....	9
Chapter II: Proselytization: Abolitionism's First Stirrings.....	13
Chapter III: The Growth of an Antislavery Ethos.....	18
Chapter IV: Benezet, Sharp, and other Antislavery Visionaries.....	26
Chapter V: Consequences of the American Revolution.....	38
Chapter VI: The Crystallization of an Antislavery Identity.....	47
Concluding Thoughts.....	54
Bibliography.....	58

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## **Introduction**

In 1807, Great Britain was the first European power to outlaw participation in the transatlantic slave trade. Less than thirty years later, the Abolition Act of 1833 ended slavery in Britain's colonies. By the end of the nineteenth century, chattel slavery was illegal in nearly every corner of the European-controlled globe. The very idea of human bondage had grown odious to the Western conscience. The obvious question then, is what changed?

Rather than address an enquiry of such magnitude, this thesis narrows the field of thought by shortening the timeline and condensing the cast. I will consider the development of antislavery sentiment in the English-speaking world through the eighteenth century, a scope that might appear either too limited or too broad depending on one's perspective. The former is the case for philosophical minds who seek insight into morality's long-term evolution; the latter prevails if one desires a comprehensive understanding of particular events and groups. While these criticisms are equally valid, I believe the scope of my thesis agrees with my methodological approach. To best understand the growth of an antislavery ethos, one must cope with political, economic, and social factors by allowing them to exist as they did in the minds of eighteenth century Britons: fluid, contemporaneous, interdependent, and comprising the constituent elements of selfhood.

This thesis will argue that the rise of antislavery sentiment in England was the cumulative outcome of a series of identity reconstructions at the individual and group level. Men and women responded to slavery's abhorrent nature by intuitively reshaping their identities in a multilayered fashion. Traditional conceptions of self, family,

community, nation, empire, world, and God's kingdom were reevaluated, torn down, and built anew in the face of slavery's patent injustices. These identity reformulations unfolded at the behest and in the midst of political fragmentation, economic imperatives, ideological movements, and social upheaval.

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England's legislative accomplishment and moral victory of 1807 was achieved after twenty years of concerted political action. William Wilberforce and his colleagues in the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* are remembered as the heroes, but thousands of unnamed English citizens were equally important, simply with their collective presence and willingness to speak out for the plight of slaves. Without sustained political organizing and the persistence of antislavery opinion, Great Britain's participation in the slave trade showed no signs of abating.

Evidently, a significant portion of the English population developed a worldview that abhorred slavery's injustice to such an extent that neutrality and inactivity were no longer acceptable. Over the course of the eighteenth century, a fundamental shift occurred in the English psyche, which allowed for the emergence of an English antislavery identity. As a means of tracking the development of this identity, I will consider the words and actions of individuals and groups, insofar as their words and actions reveal the process by which a common antislavery mentality grew. My methodological approach will draw from the *Annales School* of history, particularly from those historians who sought a *Histoire des Mentalités*. The esteemed historian Patrick H. Hutton describes this school of thought in the following terms:

Decisive in this reformulation of the problem of culture is a shift of focus from world-views, the common currency of the idealist tradition, to the structures through which such conceptions are conveyed...By describing these forms which shape the expression of ideas, the historian of mentalities maps the mental universe which furnishes a culture with its essential characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

My thesis will consider the “structures” and “forms” through which “conceptions are conveyed” and “ideas expressed,” insofar as structures and forms are the terminological and institutional mediations by which conceptions and ideas of *identity* evolve through dialectical processes and concerted organizational action. I will periodically invoke theoretical frameworks of *Annales* historians – as outlined in Hutton’s extremely helpful article, *The History of Mentalities* – as a means of elucidating my own thought processes and grounding my interpretation of historical phenomena in an established methodological style. On this note, I must also take the time to acknowledge my indebtedness to Christopher Brown’s *Moral Capital*, which has not only lent me a substantive number of quotes, but pointed me toward new realms of historical investigation.

Before delving into the world of the eighteenth century, let us briefly acknowledge this topic’s enduring relevance. In today’s society, slavery is more or less universally condemned. This unanimity wields the potential of coaxing us into categorizing history, leading toward the vacuous binary of “modern” versus “pre-modern,” as if an absolute moral threshold were crossed forever with slavery’s extinction. Such a value-laden division is misleading in light of the various forms of human bondage that still exist today, and given the often ulterior motives that contributed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Hutton, Patrick H. “The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History”. *History and Theory* 20.3 (1981): 237–259. Web... 238.



development of abolitionist sentiment. Therefore, in our attempt to understand the ideological underpinnings of an English antislavery identity, let us not lose sight of our own era's moral imperatives.

### I) Culture of Slavery

In his account of British abolitionism's origins, *Moral Capital*, Christopher Brown cautions us against linear thinking: "Antislavery thought in the eighteenth century did not build cumulatively, block by block, to a higher stage of moral consciousness." Instead, the growth of antislavery opinion prior to the 1760s was one of "isolated moralists." These thinkers publicly condemned slavery, while "the vast majority" of their contemporaries "acquiesced."<sup>2</sup> In my attempt to explain English abolitionism as a series of identity shifts at the individual and group level, Brown's words are particularly salient. The de-normalization of human bondage in the English consciousness was a protracted ordeal that ebbed and flowed in strength. The disorderly development of an English antislavery identity consisted in a collection of social and political movements whose motivations were often diffuse, conflicting, and removed from the good-evil dualism frequently invoked for making sense of perceived moral progress over the course of time.

It is precisely this disorderliness that encourages us to seek clarification in the fluid realm of identity. Even though Brown rightly exhorts us to think non-linearly, we cannot fail to account for the unavoidably sequential operation of historical phenomena. Therefore, as a starting point, let us consider the culture of slavery, as it existed *before* the growth of antislavery sentiment forced slaveholders and slave traders into defensive postures. This will allow us to better understand the social realities and psychological predispositions that antislavery thinkers were fighting against, consciously and unconsciously.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Christopher Leslie. *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the U of North Carolina, 2006. Print. 40.

From slavery's founding in the New World, and through most of the eighteenth century, the English public's prevailing mindset on slavery was an anti-antislavery mode of thought. It would be inaccurate to describe this attitude as "proslavery," since few people "thought to justify colonial slavery." For most of the eighteenth century, slavery was an institution that "rarely came under sustained attack."<sup>3</sup> The dearth of public justification for slavery was tied to the equal lack of antislavery advocacy. Instead, most subjects of the Crown – both in England and America – removed themselves from the debate, opting to overlook the glaring ethical quandary presented by human bondage.

The economic utility of slavery was integral in maintaining public neutrality. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Britain's growth as a commercial empire seemed consequent on the continuation of unpaid slave labor, and the transatlantic trade network that exchanged human beings for material goods. Raw sugar imports from the West Indies fueled England's demand for tea imports from India; textiles and weaponry manufactured in England were popular items of barter with African slave dealers; port towns such as Liverpool and Bristol relied on the slave trade for their economic livelihoods. In short, slavery was an institutional cog in Britain's increasingly transcontinental commercial network. As a means of sustaining national wealth – and thus national power – slavery's unavoidability was often greeted with tacit consent.

The detachment encouraged by materialist concerns was compounded by the fact that slavery's visceral injustices were obscure to most English people, who, after all, had never crossed the Atlantic. That slavery was out of sight played no small role in allowing for a clean national conscience. Furthermore, the vague sense of savagery conjured by the

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 35.

idea of colonial slavery was projected onto slaveholders and slaves alike. This quasi-moral, quasi-cultural projection of colonial identity was a crucial foil constructed by English citizens that, in time, would form the template for an intra-England antislavery identity. “The institution(s) of human bondage,” says Brown, “made the New World new. They helped define the differences between the Americas and Europe.”<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the vaunted principle of liberty was perceived by the English as “peculiar to English soil and inappropriate for less civilized people.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, English ideas of liberty were bound up with notions of English republicanism, whose “institutional bulwarks against arbitrary power... became entwined with a precocious sense of English national identity.”<sup>6</sup>

Evidently then, English perceptions of colonial slavery derived from broader geopolitical power dynamics. We must not lose sight of Great Britain’s transatlantic political hierarchy, whereby those who lived in the colonies – whether slaves, indentured servants, or landowners – were subject to the will of Parliament and the Crown. This legal subjection carried into the cultural sphere, which entailed the English public viewing unalloyed liberty as reserved for them and them alone. The institution of slavery simultaneously produced and verified images of colonial otherness and inferiority. These images contrasted starkly with romanticized versions of quintessentially English principles, which supposedly formed the moral foundation upon which harmonious (if unequal) social relations in England has been constructed over hundreds of years. The invisible but ubiquitous reality of colonial slavery consistently framed the development for a distinctly English identity that withstood long-term processes of change, such as

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

economic globalization, political division, and the social repercussions engendered therein.

## *II) Proselytization: Abolitionism's First Stirrings*

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, almost a century before the Society of Friends commenced its abolitionist campaign, slavery's economic incontestability did not translate to universal insensitivity amongst the English public. In terms of institutional responses to slavery, the Anglican clergy stood virtually alone in their attempts to help colonial slaves. Of course, this form of help was religiously motivated, or as Brown says, "ameliorationist rather than abolitionist or emancipationist."<sup>7</sup> In other words, Anglican missionaries did not cross the Atlantic on a noble quest to end slavery, and they held no illusions about their vocation's acceptable extent. Their primary aim was to instill Christianity in slave populations. This goal not only satisfied Christ's commands to spread the Gospel, but also enlarged the Anglican Church's institutional power and ideological credibility as an influential political body within the British state.

Assuredly, many missionaries were deeply affected by the horrors of slavery. However, as a matter of political feasibility, slaves were only offered the intangible promise of divine redemption. To make matters worse, if Christianity were conveyed to slaves in a certain fashion, it might render African men and women more submissive than beforehand. "Christianity," according to J. Harry Bennett, wielded the potential to "leave the Negro a slave, reconcile him to his chains, and make him a more diligent and docile servant."<sup>8</sup> In other words, depending on the mode and style of proselytization, the Christianization of slave populations could foster a mentality of capitulation. Hence,

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, J. Harry. *Bondsmen and Bishops: Slavery and Apprenticeship on the Codrington Plantations of Barbados, 1710-1838*. Berkeley: U of California, 1958. Print. 75.

wittingly or unwittingly, some Anglican missionaries effectively further entrenched the institution of colonial slavery.

Even if their aims seem flawed in hindsight, Anglican missionaries were the only English people in the New World working towards some form of alleviation for colonial slaves. The religious compulsion to help slaves, in one way or another, was an important first step in the development of a more comprehensive antislavery ethos amongst the English public. Given Christianity's pertinence in the growth of antislavery sentiment, it will be useful to closely consider the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), the chief institutional vehicle for English missionary work amongst slave populations in the West Indies and American colonies.

The SPG was born on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1701, with the issuing of a Royal Charter from King William III. The new organization was founded with two distinct aims: provide religious services for subjects of the Crown living abroad, and evangelize the Empire's non-Christian populations, which consisted of imported African slaves and deteriorating indigenous communities. According to historian Daniel O'Connor, the SPG's creation fulfilled new religious and moral obligations that coincided with the British Empire's expanding boundaries and diversifying demography. "With people from Britain thus widely spread and neighbor to native peoples and slaves," says O'Connor, "the Church of England saw itself as having new pastoral and missionary responsibilities."<sup>9</sup>

Members of the SPG often frowned upon the institution of slavery. According to O'Connor, there were "regular references to the slaves' grievous and pitiable state" in the SPG's Anniversary Sermons, which were effectively ecclesiastical conferences with a

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<sup>9</sup> O'Connor, Daniel. *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel, 1701-2000*. London: Continuum, 2000. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. 7.

keynote sermonizer selected by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church. These sermons' typescripts were then widely distributed throughout Europe for a larger reading audience. Moreover, these orations "regularly castigated" the "greed, wickedness, and folly" of slave owners for their "refusal to acknowledge the slaves' immortal souls." For example, the 1707 speaker William Beveridge opined on his disbelief that God could would allow for "such multitudes brought out of Africa every Year, and made Slaves to Christians in America." Beveridge suspected that colonial slavery was part of God's larger plan, in which "they [slaves] should be there [in America] all taught the Principles of the Christian Religion" before returning to Africa as Christian missionaries. It is noteworthy that the SPG's widely disseminated anniversary sermons frequently referenced the pitiable conditions of enslaved Africans. This indicates that colonial slavery's moral implications were within the ideological purview of Anglican missionaries. Furthermore, it means that common religious sentiment viewed slavery unfavorably.<sup>10</sup>

Even though members of the Anglican Church expressed indignation over the treatment of slaves, the SPG did not advance an abolitionist agenda. It was not until the 1766 anniversary sermon that an SPG Anniversary Speaker explicitly condemned Britain's active participation in the slave trade. Furthermore, when the renowned abolitionist Bielby Porteus intimated emancipationist viewpoints in his 1783 sermon, the SPG firmly disavowed Porteus's position.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the SPG was embedded within the Anglican Church hierarchy, which itself was integrally connected with England's

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<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, *Three Centuries of Mission*, 10-12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11



body politic and broader cultural identity. As such, the SPG's ameliorationist ethos reflected the public's longstanding apathy toward slavery's grimmer moral implications.

The rationale behind this provisional commitment to justice was exhibited in the words of Thomas Bray, a prominent clergyman and founding member of the SPG who understood Anglican proselytization in terms of moral indebtedness. According to Bray, missionary activity was a form of "grateful Return for the Blessed Light of the Gospel that has shone" in England, in addition to being England's peculiar duty that arose from "the Commerce and Commodities of so many Barbarous and Pagan countries" extracted by imperial organizations.<sup>12</sup> The idea that spreading the Gospel was a fair exchange for slavery's accrued material benefits is a telling statement, in its implication that religious duties were somehow caused by moral failures in the economic realm. Indeed, the interaction between materialist impulses and Christian obligations was a crucial dynamic in the development of an English antislavery identity.

In the mind of Thomas Bray and other contemporary Anglican thinkers, missionary activity was predicated on ethnic and political distinctions between unified British citizens and disjointed tribal factions; between possessors of spiritual truth and heretics in need of the Gospel; between Anglo-Saxons and savages. As O'Connor says, the SPG's mission was the embodiment of "...a political theology which saw Church and state intimately associated, theologically and practically two aspects of a single national community."<sup>13</sup> This Anglican vision of a "national community" could not treat slaves as equal citizens before the law, since it was inextricable from deep-seated sentiments of ethnic and cultural superiority; but neither could this vision tolerate imperial citizens

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<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, *Three Centuries of Mission*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

unscrupulously reducing men and women to beasts of burden without any acknowledgement of their humanity. With proselytization's non-subversive approach and 'civilizing' function, it was an effective compromise between the British Empire's conflicting economic and moral exigencies.

In the growth of an English antislavery identity, Anglican proselytization offered an ideological precedent for wider-ranging antislavery stances. It also provided a moral impetus that, over time, transmuted into more uncompromising antislavery ideologies that invoked various social, political and economic factors. Over the course of the eighteenth century, though, no subset of the English public responded to colonial slavery with greater disapprobation than the Anglican and Evangelical communities. As will be seen throughout this thesis, the Christian component of English identity was vital in paving the way for a broadly-based antislavery identity.

### III) The Growth of an Antislavery Ethos

Robert Robertson was a West Indies clergyman and active pamphleteer during the 1730s. Instead of cherry-picking passages from scripture to justify slavery's moral rectitude (as some of his more misguided contemporaries did), Robertson disparaged English clergymen who "had begun to censure American slaveholders by the 1720s for neglecting the spiritual welfare of the enslaved, for failing to instruct them in the tenets of the national church."<sup>14</sup> In other words, Robertson was aware of the cultural separatism and moral relativism that characterized England's stance toward colonial slavery. From Robertson's point of view, slavery originated and was maintained by political agents and economic powerbrokers who had never even set foot in the New World. He pointed to King Charles II's support in the late seventeenth century for an English slave trade, at the expense of lower class white workers hoping to make a better life for themselves across the Atlantic. He claimed that slavery had grown into a deep-seated institution necessary for the colonists' economic survival. He argued that English creditors held slaveholders under their financial dominion. In short, Robertson argued what seems incontrovertible in retrospect: England's culpability in slavery's evil existence.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Robertson's nuanced perspective on slavery reveals some of the historical forces and economic realities that undergirded a persisting tension in the moral calculus of transatlantic identity politics. His position is aptly encapsulated in a quote of his that, helpfully, conveys the ideological climate of the time in which he was writing. In a 1741 letter published by an British publication – over 120 years after Jamestown was founded

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 34.

and three decades' shy of the Revolutionary War<sup>16</sup> - Robertson presciently observed that "The happy (unincumber'd) nation" that pursued "the Path to true Glory" by putting "an effectual Stop to the horrid Slavery of its Fellow-Creatures, would become Arbiter of the Affairs (not of one Quarter only, but) of the greater Part of our Habitable World."<sup>17</sup>

This statement requires dismantling to understand how it effectively communicates English antislavery's stage of development at the time Robertson was writing. First, the idea that only a "happy (unincumber'd) nation" could put an end to slavery is emblematic of the extant political climate. Robertson's phrasing implies that any European empire with overseas colonies might dismantle colonial slavery, but only when conditions were ripe, which was not the case in 1741. Transatlantic commerce was thriving and human bondage was integral to the growing global economy. Furthermore, peace prevailed between European powers that held colonial interests. The Seven Years' War was still fifteen years away, and the British Empire was enjoying its increasingly hegemonic power.

Robertson's second important idea was that any nation that rid itself of slavery could emerge as an "Arbiter of the Affairs" over the "greater Part of our Habitable World." This supposition reveals the growing importance of multinational obligations of a moral character between political and economic entities, a natural consequence of an interdependent global network infused by Enlightenment principles. In such a world, Robertson prophesied, European powers would inevitably compete in more ways than one; shared ethical schemas concerning human bondage might be consecrated into a new

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<sup>16</sup> This temporal contextualization is important in light of my methodological approach. The *Annales School* emphasizes history's *Longue Durée*, which translates to an analytical emphasis of long-term historical structures.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 35.

form of transnational moral diplomacy, but only if one nation took the first step by abolishing slavery in its colonies and outlawing participation in the slave trade. In Realpolitik<sup>18</sup> terms, if Great Britain or another nation withdrew from the slave trade and abolished the institution in its colonies, then this nation would accrue moral leverage over its competitors, which could in turn allow for the realignment of political and economic relationships in a manner most propitious for the nation that initially abolished slavery. In an increasingly globalized but Eurocentric economy – wherein capital crossed oceans and between countries, and access to information from disparate corners of the globe had reached unprecedented levels of quickness – the reciprocity of moral obligations between states was of novel consequence.

Of course, ideas of transnational moral commitments found their textual basis and authoritative weight in scripture and ecclesiastical hierarchies. This leads us to Robertson's third crucial intimation, namely, that the path to abolitionism was de facto a "Path to true Glory," in which glory translated to divine justice. Indeed, as already demonstrated, the organizational and ideological growth of English antislavery sentiment relied heavily on Judeo-Christian principles prominent within popular discourse, and which already informed identity construction at the individual and group level. Longstanding religious values received a new impetus from evolving political and economic conditions; the confluence of ancient spiritual axioms and novel transatlantic politics would reconfigure conceptions of what it meant to be an English person and citizen of the British Empire.

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<sup>18</sup> Although the term "Realpolitik" originated in the nineteenth century, it aptly expresses antislavery's potential to advance political objectives in the increasingly globalized arena of the eighteenth century.

While Anglican missionaries sought amelioration for slaves – and as writers like Robert Robertson decried the hypocrisy of Englishmen who profited from the slave trade but extricated themselves from slavery’s ethical implications – there were other elements of British society that sought communities without the institution of slavery. An early example is the Georgia Colony, established in 1732 with a charter issued by King George II. The Georgia trustees, which included renowned aristocrat and social reformer, James Oglethorpe, wanted to “help the poor in England” and “provide a place of freedom for the persecuted Protestants in Europe.”<sup>19</sup> The founders wanted to avoid a “society dominated by plutocrats and slaves” in which ordinary white people were “incapable of competing for wealth and standing.”<sup>20</sup> They feared slavery would “promote aristocracy and debt by mortgaging the wealth of the community to local grandees, absentee landlords, or overseas merchants.”<sup>21</sup> Evidently, the Georgia Colony’s initial decision to bar slavery was fueled by an unconventional conceptions of European communities in the New World. This vision included moral considerations, but mostly insofar as slavery’s immorality affected the interior makeup of white, predominantly Anglo-Saxon, communities. Even though Oglethorpe was a longstanding opponent of slavery, the Georgia Colony’s designs reflected a more pressing desire for unalloyed white communities, without the presence of black Africans.

Georgia’s trustees perceived the social and economic implications of an Empire whose prestige was predicated on ruthless transatlantic commercial activity. They were

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<sup>19</sup> Lapezynski, Rebecca Ann. “The Beginnings of the Colony of Georgia”. *International Social Science Review* 73.1/2 (1998): 37–43. Web... (pg. 37).

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

troubled by the monopolistic plantations of slaveholders and feared that slavery stuck an irreconcilable wedge between landholders and tenants; between generous aristocrats and faithful laborers. Deep-seated ideas of paternal feudalism were rudely disrupted by the New World's eagerness for slavery, an institution that held no pretense about notions of natural equality between all people. In the development of an English antislavery identity, the desire for white communities untainted by slavery (as the Georgia Colony was initially envisioned) constitutes an important rung within the piecemeal trajectory.

On a related note, the desire for 'pure' white communities in America might be understood as a reactionary impulse. The introduction of large-scale slave plantations was a precursor to the mechanized industry of the nineteenth century. The dehumanization and rationalization of agrarian labor represented a cultural rupture that threatened to extinguish the imagined social harmony of rural life in England. According to Hutton, the wish to preserve particular societal conditions was identified by the *Annales School* historian Johan Huizinga, who showed how "a conception of the world could continue to influence the minds of men through its beauty and coherence long after the political and social realities it was supposed to explain had disappeared."<sup>22</sup> As demonstrated in the Georgia Colony, the desire for traditional socioeconomic systems with insular white communities was part and parcel to the development of an English identity that sought to extricate itself from the slavery's various social, economic, and ethical implications.

Related to but distinct from the Georgia experiment was a religious movement in the American colonies that Brown termed, "the Quaker antislavery ethic of the 1750s and

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<sup>22</sup> Hutton, "The History of Mentalities," 238.

1760s.”<sup>23</sup> During this period, Quaker communities in America “found new reasons to examine the relationship between their principles and their practice.” Moral reformers were concerned by a “decline of piety” and sought to “promote a renunciation of worldliness and a new fidelity to sectarian principles.”<sup>24</sup> Worries about slavery featured prominently in these reformation efforts. Leaders in Quaker communities disavowed the slavery and encouraged Quaker slaveholders to manumit their slaves. Like the Georgia Colony, the Quaker desire to rid communities of slavery can be understood as an identity reformulation at the material and ideological level. Brown describes how “the Quaker turn against slavery represented an assertion of collective identity, a refinement of what it meant to be a member of the Society of Friends” – it also represented “the triumph of an alternative conception of social and economic life.”<sup>25</sup> Slavery’s unjustness rendered it incompatible with the guiding principles of civil Anglo society, and as anathema to the Quaker spirit. Many Quakers saw slavery as a threat to traditional social relations that comprised their collective image of a just Christian community.

However, like the founding of the Georgia colony, the Quaker antislavery campaign “aimed at separatism rather than abolitionism,” and the primary goal was to “cleanse the religious society of sin” whereas the “welfare of enslaved men and women generally mattered less to them.”<sup>26</sup> In his book, *The Reformation of American Quakerism*, Jack Marietta says much the same. “The Quakers,” says Marietta, “did not stay in the mainstream of American society and advocate abolition” – rather, “...in the Quakers’ advocacy of abolition, their criticism of American society required that they stand off

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.



from it and out of government in order to see its faults.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Quakers prioritized the rectitude of their own communities, rather than the moral standards of the British Empire as a whole.

That the primary concern of Georgia’s trustees and American Quakers was *not* for the plight of slaves is an important feature in the development of an English antislavery identity. To further elucidate this point, we must consider the “deep structures” invoked by *Annales* historians, which led them to “abandon conventional narrative” due to “teleological implications,” namely, the tendency to construct a historical narrative that “gathers events into a coherent story” and “employs a subjective judgment about the direction in which the historical process is tending.”<sup>28</sup> In the context of abolitionism, a “conventional narrative” would have us conceive of English proselytization, the Georgia Colony, and Quaker antislavery measures as constituent elements in a linear trajectory of moral enlightenment. Evidence, however, refutes this hypothesis: Proselytization amounted to a consolatory gesture; Georgia’s trustees were predominantly concerned by slavery’s tangential effects on white communities; American Quakers conceived of slavery as sin, but only sought to eliminate this sin from their own communities.

As I mentioned in chapter one, an absence of linearity is not a deterrent in tracking the evolution of an English antislavery identity. In fact, if perceptions and re-perceptions of individual and collective identity are reflective of structural shifts in the social, economic, and political planes of the human condition, then observing oscillations in conceptions of English identity vis-à-vis slavery is a methodological approach parallel

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<sup>27</sup> Marietta, Jack D. *The Reformation of American Quakerism 1748-1783*. Philadelphia Pa: U of Pennsylvania, 1984. Print. XV.

<sup>28</sup> Hutton, “The History of Mentalities,” 240.

to what the *Annales* scholars encourage, namely, analysis of “the ‘deep structures’ of historical reality,” as opposed to the “rapid and episodic” version of political history traditionally posited.<sup>29</sup> Thus far, I have concentrated on three sets of historical phenomena – Anglican proselytization, the Georgia Colony, and Quaker antislavery measures – as a means of outlining history’s “deep structures,” insofar as these structural realities influenced the reformulation of English identity in the face of slavery’s wickedness.

As the reader will recall, I also considered the viewpoint of Robert Robertson, a historical figure whose words were embedded within – and therefore help illuminate – the ideological landscape that delineated popular discourse in the middle of the eighteenth century. Common conceptual terms of self-identification amongst the English populace simultaneously mediated and demarcated the forms of identity renovation that transpired in relation to slavery. As Hutton says, for the historian of mentalities, “...discourse is of interest because it provides an index to meaning. In plotting how the meanings assigned to a discourse succeed one another, the historian of mentalities is able to trace the direction in which civilization is tending.”<sup>30</sup> In this spirit of textual analysis, let us now turn our attention to prominent antislavery essayists whose visions for English and imperial society laid the ideological groundwork for an antislavery identity in the pre-Revolutionary era.

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<sup>29</sup> Hutton, “The History of Mentalities,” 240.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

#### *IV) Benezet, Sharp, and other Antislavery Visionaries*

Given the transatlantic scope of British identity politics, it seems fitting that a leading figure in the antislavery movement, Anthony Benezet, was of a multinational upbringing. Born in France to Protestant parents, Benezet's childhood was marked by migration: first to the Netherlands, then London, and finally Philadelphia. Benezet, a Quaker, made his name in the colonies and England as a vociferous antislavery activist. His uncompromising belief in universal abolitionism distinguished him from his more insular thinking Quaker peers.

In 1762, Benezet published a widely circulated tract: *A short account of that part of Africa inhabited by the Negroes: with respect to the fertility of the country, the good disposition of many of the natives, and the manner by which the slave trade is carried on*. In the context of identity reformulation, this essay's title is revealing in itself. That Benezet's primary focus was on the homeland of enslaved Africans signifies his willingness and desire to contend with slavery's repercussions beyond the British Empire's territorial parameters. In this essay Benezet decried the "Bloodshed continually fomented in those unhappy People's Country" as a result of the slave trade.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Benezet's outrage over slavery's repercussions in African communities was connected to religious and patriotic sentiments. "The iniquity of being so deeply engaged in a trade," according to Benezet, "is greatly aggravated from the Consideration that we, as a Nation, have been peculiarly favoured with the bright Beams of the Gospel."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Benezet, Anthony. *A short account of that part of Africa, inhabited by the negroes. With respect to the fertility of the country; the good disposition of many of the natives, and the manner by which the slave trade is carried on...* The second edition, with large additions and amendments. Philadelphia, 1762. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Benezet's idea that slavery's injustices were aggravated because slave traders were English and Christian is telling insofar as it reveals the inveterate biases that stunted the development of any truly impartial antislavery identity. As a pious Quaker, Benezet was acutely conscious of slavery's immorality. Meanwhile, as a member of Great Britain's extended ethnic, cultural, and linguistic community, Benezet was troubled by slavery's discordance with traditional sentiments of British liberty and political justice. In his attempts to grapple with slavery, Benezet needed to confront multiple layers of identity: how he saw himself as a moral agent accountable to God, and how various religious, national, and cultural components of his identity required reevaluation vis-à-vis slavery.

Benezet's decial of slavery's repercussions for British and African communities signals a form of identity reformulation grounded in a universalist orientation.<sup>33</sup> This broadening of mental horizons was partially inspired by Benezet's religious background. In his book, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, David Turley stresses the importance of the "Evangelical image of humanity as one 'great family'" which "incorporated the imperative of proper order within local and national communities." Atop this transcendental belvedere, slavery "constituted a burden of individual and national guilt and... provided a way of extending and giving reality to the notion of mankind as a family."<sup>34</sup> Benezet, a pious Quaker, saw himself as an advocate of this Evangelical ethos. In his recognition of Africa's social deterioration, Benezet encouraged his readers to

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<sup>33</sup> In this context, "universalist" signifies a philosophical worldview that prioritizes universal social justice over national, ethnic, and other tribal allegiances.

<sup>34</sup> Turley, David. *The Culture of English Antislavery: 1780-1860*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. Print. 20.

conceive of slavery as an institution that negatively affected all of mankind, not just the British Empire or European world.

Benezet gave further expression to this universalist worldview in 1767, when he published another treatise on slavery that hinted at the existence of unprecedented ethical imperatives engendered in his epoch. According to Benezet, “the general rights and liberties of mankind” had entered into “universal consideration” like no other era previously.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the origins of Benezet’s universalist logic not only stemmed from his religious background. It also arose in response to the increasingly global scale of political entities, economic systems, and channels of communication. For Benezet, humankind’s newfound transcontinental scale demanded a corresponding reevaluation of power relations, with the aim of satisfying fundamental moral benchmarks. Slavery, of course, was an unethical relic from a long-gone era.

Benezet harnessed this universalist frame of mind as a means of reconfiguring his perception of “society” and its constituent elements. “This practice [slavery],” according to Benezet, was “destructive of the welfare of human society.”<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, ideas of society were perceived in terms of national identity and particular cultural phenomena generated therein. For instance, English society in the eighteenth century contrasted sharply with notions of French society, or Russian society. However, Benezet discounted these distinctions and stressed the need to recognize “human society” when thinking critically about slavery. Benezet underscored this point by quoting an unnamed contemporary, who wrote in 1757: ‘The Negroes in our Colonies endure a slavery more

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<sup>35</sup> Benezet, Anthony. *A caution to Great Britain and her colonies, in a short representation of the calamitous state of the enslaved Negroes in the British dominions. By Ant. Benezet. [London], 1767.* Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

compleat and attended with far worse circumstances than what any people in their condition suffer in any other part of the world, or have suffered in any other period of time.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, Benezet was not alone in his universalist orientation. The anonymous author, like Benezet, conceived of slavery’s immorality through a lens unbounded by geographical and temporal constraints. In terms of identity reformulation, a widened mental horizon shows a growing sensibility for fundamental moral certainties at the expense of traditional group allegiances.

When Benezet published this second essay in 1767, a young Englishman was just starting to get involved in the burgeoning antislavery movement. Born in 1735, over twenty-two years after Benezet, Granville Sharp was a young civil servant and son to a distinguished clergyman. In 1765, while visiting his brother in London, Sharp encountered a badly beaten slave named Jonathan Strong who had been cast into the streets by a callous master. Granville and his brother paid for Strong’s treatment and restoration, but two years later in 1767, Strong’s old master tracked him down, kidnapped him, and arranged to sell him to a planter in the West Indies. Sharp received word of these developments and managed to procure a court hearing that won Strong his freedom. This chain of events set Sharp on his way to becoming one of England’s most vocal antislavery activists.

Over the next two years, Sharp continued working to prevent the extradition of freed black people living in England. In 1769, Sharp acquired further notoriety with a contentious essay on slavery’s unlawfulness in England. In this tract, Sharp drew sharp contrasts – in terms of cultural criteria and legal institutions – between England and her

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<sup>37</sup> Benezet, *A Caution to Great Britain*, 6.

colonies. His uncompromising vehemence was accompanied by a conceptual framework for an English identity removed from, and pitted against, the institution of colonial slavery. Sharp castigated his compatriots who “still endeavor to inculcate and maintain, even in this island, the ungenerous West Indian Notions” concerning property in slaves.<sup>38</sup> It is of consequence that Sharp distinguished “West Indian Notions” from, presumably, “notions” of an English variety. This conceptual distinction imputed moral responsibility onto colonial slaveholders. He then lamented the “Ruffians” who kidnapped free black people living in England to sell them abroad, accusing them of acting in, “open Contempt of the English Laws, and of the Habeas Corpus act in particular... Negroes, and all other Aliens are the *King’s Subjects* entitled to the Protection of the English Laws.”<sup>39</sup> Sharp’s appeal to English law allowed him to posit a historicized vision of English identity in which time-honored legal institutions elevated the moral stature and political maturity of English people over American colonists.

Sharp stressed this divergence by highlighting disparate conceptions of private property. According to Sharp, Englishmen who attempted to sell free black people to slaveholders in the colonies, “cannot possibly ground their Defence on any other Point whatsoever, than this single Plea *of private Property*.”<sup>40</sup> Given that slavery’s justificatory basis revolved around colonial ideas of private property, Sharp was insinuating the divergence of value systems between England and her colonies. In slavery’s monetization and commodification of human beings, Sharp perceived an institution grossly anathema

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<sup>38</sup> Sharp, Granville. *An appendix to the Representation, (printed in the year 1769,) of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery, or of admitting the least claim of private property in the persons of men in England. By Granville Sharp. London, MDCCLXXII. [1772]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. Claremont College Library. 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

to common perceptions of England's political tradition, which placed a high value on liberty, and which valued fair arbitration on matters of private property. Indeed, this latter point was clearly expressed in the 1760s by the esteemed jurist and legal scholar, William Blackstone, who noted that in England, "the metes and boundaries of private property" were kept in check via the "...twofold barrier, of a presentment and a trial by jury" which fairly balanced "the liberties of the people, and the prerogative of the crown."<sup>41</sup> Or, as Sharp bluntly put it: "*The law of England is a Law of Mercy.*"<sup>42</sup>

Sharp's commentary on private property also borrowed from religious principles and Enlightenment ideals. "It must appear," said Sharp, "that the law doth no wrong, when it rejects the *lesser* claim of *estimable* property, in favour of that *natural interest* which is *inestimable*."<sup>43</sup> Of course, notions of "natural law" were integral to political ideologies espoused by Enlightenment thinkers. For Sharp, the right to not live in perpetual bondage fell into the category of "natural law." If Enlightenment ideals offered a modern conceptual framework for Sharp's antislavery ideology, then Christianity supplied a more ancient repository of ethical currency. "That such Barbarity should be suffered in Christian nations," was, according to Sharp, "a serious concern."<sup>44</sup> Like Benezet, Sharp was a firm believer in Christianity's epistemological veracity and moral unassailability. As such, Sharp's idea of a moral political system, the type towards which England needed to strive, was rooted in timeless religious duties.

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<sup>41</sup> Blackstone, William, Sir. *Commentaries on the laws of England. ... By William Blackstone, Esq. Vinerian Professor of Law, and solicitor general to her Majesty.* Vol. Volume 4. Oxford, M.DCC.LXV. [1765]-69. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 343.

<sup>42</sup> Sharp, *An appendix to the Representation*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



At a deeper, structural level, Sharp's ideas on private property struck to the heart of transatlantic identity fragmentation. In his 1769 essay, Sharp argued that "every claim *of Property* is absolutely *unjust in itself*, and must necessarily be set aside through *the mercy* of the Law, if it interferes, or is inconsistent with that *natural* and *equitable* claim to *personal security*, which the law of the kingdom hath *always favoured*."<sup>45</sup> While Sharp's glamorized ideas of English legal history were overblown for rhetorical purposes, the impetus behind them nonetheless indicates a disconnection between traditional English mores and the political and economic principles upon which the American colonies were founded. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Indians, slaves, and indentured servants suffered and died under a lack of legal oversight for their personal security. The very concept of America was predicated on the prerogative of colonists to seize property and assets that did not belong to them in any "natural" sense. The colonial definition and application of private property diverged markedly from English ideas on liberty's permanence and institutionalization. These divergences were heightened in England's public consciousness over the course of the eighteenth century as transatlantic tension escalated into conflict, and as the issue of slavery took on new layers of meaning.

Granville Sharp's righteous crusade reached its climax in 1772 when Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench, handed down a legal ruling on a case that involved a runaway slave named James Somersett. The historian Jerome Nadelhaft describes how the English public misunderstood Lord Mansfield's court ruling. "In reality," says Nadelhaft, "Mansfield had only ruled that 'a slave could not be shipped

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<sup>45</sup> Sharp, *An appendix to the Representation*, 10.

from England against his wills.”<sup>46</sup> This reality was not apprehended by the “great many Englishmen” who “mistakenly believed that Lord Mansfield had with one sweeping judicial blow destroyed the institution of slavery in England.”<sup>47</sup> To understand how this public confusion features in the development of an English antislavery identity, it will be helpful to quote Nadelhaft at length:

The *Somerset* decision was misunderstood in 1772 because newspaper printers, readers, and almost everyone involved in the case had for five months been conditioned to think in a narrow and rigid pattern. The *Somerset* case had been hailed as “the great Negro Case,” the case which would end only when the Chief Justice had ruled on slavery’s legality. The case had been built up as one involving a central issue – slavery or freedom for all England’s slaves, not simply for one – which could not be dodged by legal subtleties.<sup>48</sup>

The English public’s bestowal of gravitas onto the *Somerset* Case is an interesting phenomenon. How can we explain a widespread desire for a full-scale referendum on slavery in England? Why did the English conceive of this legal ruling as “the great Negro case,” even as the national slave trade thrived?

The clamor that arose around the *Somerset* Case shows not only the existence of a latent antislavery ethos in the English discourse, but a common desire to reaffirm national identity as singular in moral quality. Indeed, the winning strategy of the *Somerset* lawyers was to say that in England, freedom was “the grand object of the laws”; that slavery could not exist in England because it was “not a natural relation”; because it was “incompatible with natural rights of mankind”; and because it was opposed to Christianity’s “mild and humane precepts.”<sup>49</sup> The successful *Somerset*

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<sup>46</sup> Nadelhaft, Jerome. “The *Somerset* Case and Slavery: Myth, Reality, and Repercussions”. *The Journal of Negro History* 51.3 (1966): 193–208. 194.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

lawyers couched their argument in terms of an English identity supreme in moral rectitude, steadfast in religious benevolence, and avant-garde in its adherence to “natural laws.”

In 1773, a year after the *Somerset Case*, Granville Sharp published, *An essay on slavery: proving from Scripture its inconsistency with humanity and religion*. In addition to its professed subject, this essay lent further expression to an identity dichotomy that juxtaposed respectable English churchgoers with unfamiliar colonial slaveholders. In assembling this narrative, Sharp struggled to reconcile nationalistic prejudices and matter-of-fact conditions. “That slavery is not consistent with the English constitution, nor admissible in Great Britain, appears evident” from the *Somerset Case*’s “solemn determination,” said Sharp.<sup>50</sup> This was despite the already mentioned fact that Lord Mansfield ruled on neither the legality of slaveholding in England nor the legality of the English slave trade. Regardless, soon thereafter, Sharp suggested the symbiosis of religious and national virtue, noting that slavery was unacceptable in England because Christianity was “a part of the law” in his country.<sup>51</sup> This passage, while plainly self-validating, also implied that England’s centralized and steadfast Anglicanism was a hallmark of English identity, effectually drawing a tacit distinction with America’s unincorporated assortment of Protestant denominations.

In this essay Sharp also conveyed a sense of distantness between England and the institution of slavery. He expressed dismay that “the descendants of Britain,” did not seek

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<sup>50</sup> Sharp, Granville. *An essay on slavery, proving from Scripture its inconsistency with humanity and religion...* Burlington [N.J.], 1773. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. VI.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.

redress for the sin of slavery.<sup>52</sup> It appears that Sharp's description of colonial inhabitants as "descendants" of Britain is not without insinuation. His phrasing connotes a peculiar aloofness, as if the Crown had forcibly removed its lesser subjects to the other side of the Atlantic at some point in the remote past. This sentiment is further developed when Sharp denies England's agency in slavery's initial establishment. He attributed its persistence to "a kind of side-wind," and claimed that it was a "barbarous custom... originated by foreigners."<sup>53</sup> At an intellectual level, Sharp probably understood that England was morally reproachable for slavery. Perhaps to counteract this implicit cognizance, he ascribed slavery's origins to vaguely defined, non-English groups. Sharp did not elaborate on who these foreigners were, but he didn't need to. His implication – that slavery was concocted by non-British people – was acutely felt.

Sharp then quoted a colonial lawyer and future American revolutionary, James Otis, who thought of slavery's origins in similar terms, saying that it "threatens one day to reduce both Europe and America to the ignorance and barbarity of the darkest ages."<sup>54</sup> Of course, British notions of "barbarism" were largely synonymous with images of non-white populations, as in diametric opposition to the purported Anglo-Saxon ideal. Otis's implication was that if slavery degraded the standards of European morality, then this degradation was a reversal of the civilizing process, and Europeans would begin to resemble the foreigners who instituted human bondage in the first place. The vague terminology employed by Sharp and Otis was, firstly, indicative of a shared desire for a national and ethnic identity that bore little to no responsibility for slavery's origins.

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<sup>52</sup> Sharp, *An essay on slavery*, VI.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.

Secondly, we must bear in mind that Sharp was writing with an aim in mind, namely, the cultivation of antislavery sentiment in England. To realize this goal, he seems to have perceived the necessity of at least partially absolving national sins by labeling non-English people as the architects of slavery's evils.

A vocal advocate against Granville Sharp and the Somerset ruling was Edward Long, a British colonial administrator and historian. In 1772, Long published a widely read essay, *Candid Reflections*, which attempted to refute Lord Mansfield's ruling and halt any momentum in antislavery opinion. One of Long's central points was that the vaunted institutionalization of English liberty in fact authorized slavery. Long prefaced this argument by describing slavery as an offshoot of traditional socioeconomic hierarchies in England: "On the decline of villenage within the realm, a species of it sprang up in the remoter parts of the English dominion, the *American Plantations*."<sup>55</sup> Long's corroboration for this claim was that villenage "was not abolished by any positive statute" but instead "grew into desuetude by the gradual extension of our national commerce."<sup>56</sup> In this mode of thought, conditions of slavery were not anathema to the English spirit – they simply grew unnecessary as conditions changed over time. Besides, according to Long, English legal precedents posed no obstacles either: "That neither *Magna Charta*, nor the statutes of confirmation [in the subsequent centuries], impeached the power which a master exercised, of imprisoning the Villein; but, on the contrary, that other statutes were passed contemporary with the latter, to aid and enforce his power."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Long, Edward. *Candid reflections upon the judgement lately awarded by the Court of King's Bench, in Westminster-Hall, on what is commonly called the negroe-cause, by a planter*. London, MDCCLXXII. [1772]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

The Magna Carta, often perceived by Englishmen as the bedrock of liberty, held no sway over the contemporary debate on slavery, according to Long. England's legal history sanctioned the dominion of landlords over laborers, and slavery did not deserve any special attention on the matter.

Long's argument that slavery was *not* opposed to English identity rejected the ideological basis of Somerset's defense lawyers, of whom Granville Sharp was chief counsel. Noticeably, Long's rebuttal essay mostly consisted of historical digressions and legal explications. Unlike Sharp, Long avoided distinctions between colonial identity and English identity in the context of slavery. Contrariwise, he asserted that slavery was "agreeable to the *national sense*,"<sup>58</sup> which for Long consisted in the optimization of imperial economic productivity. Through this commercial lens, slavery was not only acceptable, but integral to England's power and prestige. Long offered a vision of Empire markedly at odds with the ideas of antislavery men like Benezet and Sharp. The conflict between these viewpoints was rooted in diverging conceptions of imperial identity: Should the Empire prioritize commercial growth at all costs? Or should it focus on disseminating and embodying national and religious principles? With the onset of the American Revolution, these competing conceptions of national and imperial identity would receive a new impetus and take on new meanings.

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<sup>58</sup> Long, *Candid Reflections*, 4.

## V) Consequences of the American Revolution

At a surface level, the American Revolution appears to have spurred antislavery sentiment in England and stunted it in America. Slavery in America persisted until the middle of the nineteenth century, while in England, a public campaign for abolitionism took off in the late 1780s, culminating in the landmark 1807 Abolition Law. During the tumultuous years of the Revolutionary War, however, antislavery sentiment was largely absent in the British Isles. As Brown puts it, “an antislavery movement failed to develop in Britain during the American Revolution.”<sup>59</sup>

In revolutionary America, meanwhile, ideological fervor and political reorganization led to unprecedented antislavery measures: “From Philadelphia to Boston, between 1767 and 1775, there issued a parade of antislavery resolutions, petitions, sermons, pamphlets, and legislation aimed principally at halting the slave trade to the American colonies.”<sup>60</sup> During these years of warfare, uncertainty, and unrest, there developed in America the “moral and ethical injunctions” against slavery that would remain “a factor in American politics and culture.”<sup>61</sup> While the interconnectedness of imperial oppression and colonial slavery entered the consciousness of many American revolutionaries, “the vast majority of the texts” written by Englishmen during this period did, “not refer to colonial slavery or the Atlantic slave trade.”<sup>62</sup> Because of this discrepancy, Brown encourages us to perceive the sustained rise of England’s antislavery

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<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 113.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

movement in the 1780s as “a late-born sibling in the family of Anglo-American antislavery campaigns.”<sup>63</sup>

While Brown is right to suggest the American Revolution enabled English antislavery advocacy, I argue we must conceive of the Revolution within the long-term development of an English antislavery identity that conceived of English citizens and colonists as fundamentally different. With this point in mind, it seems unsurprising that English essayists during the Revolution tacitly propagated an identity narrative in which slavery was, “a peculiarly American vice.”<sup>64</sup> After all, America’s institutionalization of slavery had been invoked by Englishmen for decades to differentiate colonial identity from English identity.

From a simple hierarchical perspective, it is apparent why the American Revolution was so acutely damning on England’s supposed moral superiority. The immorality attributed to colonial slaveholders by English essayists was a less convincing strain of logic if, as colonists claimed, the English were themselves despots. In short, revolutionary fervor shined a light on the moral character of transatlantic institutions in the English-speaking world; slavery’s blatant injustices rendered further institutional scrutiny unavoidable.

When the American Revolution began in 1775, many prominent Englishmen argued against the case for American independence. In these treatises, the institution of colonial slavery was occasionally invoked. It was a reliable point of reference for Englishmen to decry the hypocrisy of revolutionaries who purported to cherish liberty and freedom for *all* men. When slavery was mentioned, the familiar us-versus-them

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<sup>63</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 117.



narrative resurfaced. Of course, prior to the American Revolution, no strategic imperatives demanded the formation of any identity dichotomy. Rather, an English antislavery identity had been primarily of theoretical concern, without practical exigencies calling it into service. With the onset of revolt, however, the conceptual schema and definitional terms of an English antislavery identity groomed in the preceding years were now available for practical use.

In his 1775 essay, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*, the esteemed Anglican minister and theologian John Wesley took issue with colonists who referred to themselves as slaves of the Crown. “Yea, nine in ten throughout England, have no representative, have no vote,” said Wesley. “Yet they are no slaves: they enjoy both Civil and Religious liberty.”<sup>65</sup> Wesley’s qualification of slavery amplified his subsequent point: “Who then is a Slave,” the theologian asked. “Look into America, and you may easily see. See that Negro, fainting under the load, bleeding under the lash! He is a slave.”<sup>66</sup> By contrasting the justness of imperial government with colonial slavery’s harsh realities, Wesley portrayed the revolting colonists as unprincipled and hypocritical. Continuing this line of argument, Wesley appealed to the idea of two diverging moral viewpoints, effectively attributing blameworthiness to the colonists: “But wherein then consists the difference between Liberty and Slavery? Herein. You and I, and the English in general, go where we will, and enjoy the fruit of our labors: This is liberty. The negro does not: this is slavery.”<sup>67</sup> Wesley’s rapidly constructed binary between English liberty

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<sup>65</sup> Wesley, John. *A calm address to our American colonies*. By John Wesley, M. A. A new edition, corrected, and enlarged. London, [1775]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. IV.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., V.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., V.

and American slavery implied a fundamental cultural rupture between English citizens and colonial subjects. Furthermore, Wesley's distinction between free men and enslaved men parallels his implicit distinction between England and America; between the land of liberty and the land of slavery. In his rejection of American independence, Wesley condemned the moral character of colonists with a broad sweep of the brush, assigning shared liability to all colonists for upholding the institution of slavery.

We see a similar portrayal of colonial immorality in Josiah Tucker's 1775 tract, *A Letter to Edmund Burke*. Tucker was a prominent churchman, economist, and political writer who perceived in slavery a wicked institution unbefitting of England's national character. He claimed to be "...thoroughly convinced, that the Laws of Commerce, when rightly understood, do perfectly coincide with the laws of Morality," and that slavery was "...on a fair Calculation, to be the most onerous and expensive Mode of cultivating Land, and of raising Produce, that could be devised."<sup>68</sup> Tucker's moral relativism seems glaringly obvious in hindsight. That he neglected to consider whether or not England's extensive slave trading operations adhered to "the laws of Commerce" or "the laws of Morality" is indicative of the patriotic bias that directed his line of thought when confronted by the issue of slavery. This prejudice prodded him into declaring that history had already demonstrated that, "all Masters of Slaves, who are not Slaves themselves, were, and are, in every Part of the World, possessed with the Haughtiness of Domination respecting others, and with an invincible Spirit of Freedom regarding themselves."<sup>69</sup> Tucker then expanded this argument, noting that American slaveholders were

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<sup>68</sup> Tucker, Josiah. *A letter to Edmund Burke, Esq*; Second edition, corrected. Gloucester, M.DCC.LXXV. [1775]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 22.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

predisposed to be “turbulent and factious in respect to the Public, incessantly endeavoring to pull down and lay low every Order and Degree of Men above themselves.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, for Tucker, slavery not only denigrated the moral standing of American colonists. It also engendered a subversive mindset that threatened political stability and effectively invalidated colonial protests.

In 1778, a prominent figure named William Pulteney expressed similar viewpoints. The wealthy politician decried the hypocrisy of slaveholding colonists and portrayed the colonists as conscienceless beasts. Pulteney described a horror-show in which slaveholders devised “...the most unjust and severe torments that ingenious cruelty can invent, or unrelenting tyranny can practice.”<sup>71</sup> With this line of argument, Pulteney gave expression to an inveterate streak of cruelty among colonists that manifested itself in the institution of slavery. He developed this theme further, describing how colonial slaves were, “...subjected to the caprice of an imperious tyrant, who has unjustly deprived him of liberty, deliberately rendered his existence miserable, and by virtue of his iniquitous and hellish bargain, pretends he has a right to dispose even of life itself.”<sup>72</sup> While there is plenty of truth in these condemnations, what’s important for our purposes is Pulteney’s inclination to attack colonial slavery and exonerate England. Indeed, the foil to his vitriolic condemnations is the lack of attention paid to England’s prosperous slave trading industry.

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<sup>70</sup> Tucker, *A Letter to Edmund Burke*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Pulteney, William. *An appeal to reason and justice, in behalf of the British constitution, and the subjects of the British empire. Esq.* London, MDCCLXXVIII. [1778]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Even if prominent English writers castigated slavery, their rebukes were largely ad hoc measures. For most supposed opponents of slavery, "...helping enslaved Africans often mattered far less...than more proximate and sometimes very different goals."<sup>73</sup> Hence, the issue slavery acquired greater relevance in the charged ideological landscape of the American Revolution. In the transatlantic debate around the meaning of liberty and purpose of government, slavery appeared incongruent with not only purported Revolutionary ideals, but the entire Enlightenment mode of thought that informed England's conception of how liberty ought to be institutionalized. Luckily for the English writers who argued against the American Revolution, slavery (as opposed to the slave trade) was widespread in America and absent in England. This straightforward discrepancy led to reflexive invocations of colonial slavery within the fabric of their broader pro-English arguments.

In his book *Runaway America*, David Waldstreicher helpfully identifies three predominant schemas whereby the English conceived of American colonists prior to and during the Revolutionary War. The first was, "the most traditional," where the English "viewed Americans as fellow nationals." The second, "...cast the Americans as foreigners who were, nevertheless, part of the empire." The third perspective, "...placed the Americans beyond the English nation but still part of the expanded British community."<sup>74</sup> While these viewpoints might be valid at a general level, I endeavor to say that none of them accurately describe the English perception of colonial identity *when* colonial identity was conceived vis-à-vis slavery. To be sure, the prism of slavery was not

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<sup>73</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Waldstreicher, David. *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. Print. 179.

*a priori* invoked when English people contemplated the culture and identity of American colonists. However, when slavery *was* brought into the identity equation, *then* perceptions of colonial identity shifted in a negative direction. Naturally, the moral tenets and philosophical ideals of the American Revolution heightened the necessity for such a cultural distinction. In colonial slavery, the English perceived an institution that annulled the colonists' supposed prioritizations of universal liberty. In advancing this argument, Englishmen drew from the conceptual terms of differentiation that had permeated the transatlantic identity discourse for decades.

When analyzing appeals to slavery by anti-Revolutionary English writers, we must also bear in mind the contemporaneous antislavery activity in America. As I have already mentioned, the Revolutionary War inadvertently produced the ideological bedrock for American abolitionism in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the birth of this intellectual framework was accompanied by concrete action. In 1774 and 1776, America's newly formed Continental Congress instituted "vigorously enforced resolves [that] brought the slave trade to a standstill until the end of the Revolutionary War."<sup>75</sup> Hence, for many American patriots, revolutionary activity reconfigured traditional conceptions of social and economic systems. In their boycott of the slave trade, American revolutionaries sought to "justify the struggle for political liberty, to sanctify their rejection of imperial authority, to render the Revolutionary movement worthy of esteem."<sup>76</sup> Of course, abolitionist stirrings in Revolutionary America would not amount to concrete action for many years to come. Even so, antislavery sentiment and abolitionist organization were, during the Revolutionary War, more prevalent in America than in

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<sup>75</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 136.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Great Britain. Therefore, from 1775 to 1783, American colonists were patently more active in advancing liberty than their British peers, both in terms of liberty as a general principle, and liberty in its relation to slavery and the slave trade. Liberty, of course, was conceived by Englishmen as the hallmark of just governance. Moreover, in terms of political organization, liberty was thought to be embodied in England's harmonious arrangement of Monarchical authority tempered by Parliamentary representation.

In light of this discrepancy, it seems fitting that abolitionism took off in England after the Revolutionary War. Was the ascent of antislavery sentiment in the English consciousness something of a collective knee-jerk reaction to their American counterparts outperforming them in the fight to uphold that vaunted, quintessentially English, idea of liberty? Brown hints at such a conclusion, saying: "By the early 1780s, some in Britain had begun to select new criteria when evaluating overseas enterprise. The moral character of imperial authority, the ethics of British conduct outside the British isles, started to figure in the public discussions of empire with increasing frequency"; there emerged "...new ideas that aimed to bring imperial practices in line with older assumptions about the British commitment to liberty."<sup>77</sup> Thus, the American Revolution profoundly influenced English ideas of how liberty ought to figure in the management of a global empire. New conceptions of English identity would need to reevaluate the moral character of imperial institutions.

It is worthwhile to consider the American Revolution alongside the theoretical work of Norbert Elias, an *Annales* historian who sought to explain the "civilizing process" of Europe, whereby "...the relatively spontaneous behavior of medieval man is

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<sup>77</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 161.

gradually displaced by the socially disciplined and emotionally constrained behavior of his modern counterpart.” In this process of constraint, according to Elias, “The threshold of shame measures tolerable social behavior in a given historical era.” “By charting the changes in the threshold of shame from one era to the next, the emerging contours of the structure of the personality of Western man are defined.”<sup>78</sup> If one wishes to understand an English antislavery identity as consequent upon the American Revolution, then Elias’s “threshold of shame” does wonders in accounting for the psychological underpinnings of England’s widespread antislavery sentiment in the 1780s. Perhaps, the Revolutionary War – insofar as it demonstrated the rectitude of colonists and challenged England’s commitment to liberty – served as an impetus that allowed for a “threshold of shame” to be crossed in the English consciousness. As will be shown presently, the ideological climate of the 1780s compounded this sense of shame, amplified the antislavery sensibility, and paved the way for a sustained abolitionist campaign.

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<sup>78</sup> Hutton, “The History of Mentalities,” 248.

## VI) The Crystallization of an Antislavery Identity

“By the end of 1787,” says James Walvin, a historian on slavery, “the abolitionist campaign had become genuinely popular: nationwide, it cut across boundaries of class and region – and gender.”<sup>79</sup> Brown corroborates this account, saying: “The breadth of public support in those first heady months had few precedents in the late eighteenth-century British political history.”<sup>80</sup> This was no small feat, considering the scarcity of antislavery sentiment not long beforehand. The American Revolution widened England’s national discourse around issues like the purpose of empire, the meaning of liberty, and the nature of tyranny. Walvin notes, “...America loomed large in British life. Politics were overshadowed by the British disasters and defeat in North America.”<sup>81</sup> Slavery’s relationship to the War was unavoidable, and in light of the colonists’ boycott of the English slave trade, imperially sanctioned human bondage came to the forefront of the English conscience like never before.

Even with the American Revolution’s pivotal influence over English perceptions of slavery, events in the colonies did not lead inexorably to 1787, when *The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* was founded and the English antislavery movement kicked off in earnest. When the Majesty’s troops were effectively defeated at the Siege of Yorktown in October of 1781, there was no indication that slavery would persist in the post-war national conversation. However, with the Revolution’s emphases on liberty and justice, the English public had, perhaps unwittingly, adopted a more objective mindset in their evaluation of imperial conduct. The revolt of the colonies

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<sup>79</sup> Walvin, James. *Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*. New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 2011. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 190.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Walvin, *Zong: A Massacre*, 164.



primed the English to be more cognizant of injustices committed on their behalf. This cognizance was evident in the March of 1783, when a series of horrific events on the high seas entered England's public discussion.

What's now known as the the *Zong* massacre occurred in November of 1781, nearly a year and a half before headlines were made in the English press. The *Zong* was a slave trading ship that belonged to a slave-trading syndicate based out of Liverpool and owned by a wealthy merchant named William Gregson. While transporting captured Africans across the Atlantic, a series of navigational mistakes jeopardized the feasibility of the *Zong* berthing in Black River, Jamaica, its intended port. With supplies running low, the *Zong*'s crew opted to jettison over one hundred Africans, throwing them overboard to drown. The crew's decision appears to have been financially motivated. Like most slave-trading companies, the Gregson syndicate had taken out insurance on the lives of their future slaves, since Africans were categorized as "cargo." If they died onshore, or of "natural causes" while being transported, the insurers would provide no monetary recompense. However, if the *Zong*'s crew could demonstrate that their decision to jettison "cargo" was done in order to save the lives of other soon-to-be slaves, then the insurers were liable to pay Gregson's company. Legal proceedings began in March of 1783 when insurers refused any form of remuneration.<sup>82</sup>

The *Zong* Massacre might have escaped public attention were it not for Olaudah Equiano, a free black man living in London who informed Granville Sharp about the case. Naturally, Sharp would not allow such a patent atrocity to slide. The aging abolitionist, "dispatched angry missives left and right – long, furious letters – to any

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<sup>82</sup> Walvin, *Zong: A Massacre*.

individual or organization he thought might help” – in short, Sharp “employed every means in his power to give the utmost publicity to the circumstances that had happened.”<sup>83</sup> Thanks to the efforts of Equiano and Sharp, the facts of the *Zong* case entered England’s national discussion. More than just that, “...the grisly details about the slave trade seeped from the courtroom into the wider public sphere.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, “the story of the *Zong* went from being an utterly exceptional story to becoming the very model for the slave trade itself.”<sup>85</sup> Of course, the timing of the *Zong* case is critical. Over the course of the eighteenth century, innumerable Africans died while crossing the Atlantic Ocean in English slave ships. In theory, there was nothing new about Englishmen killing Africans.

For Walvin, “...what gave the *Zong* story its significance was its *immediacy*.”<sup>86</sup> “In essence... the *Zong* case was a very British event... The ship, the men, the courts, the law officers, even the law itself, were all local, not exotic or foreign.”<sup>87</sup> This feeling of locality was vital in promoting the English public’s increased awareness of the slave trade’s horrors. However, that the *Zong* case transpired in English courts cannot alone account for its role in the development of an English antislavery identity. Rather, the *Zong* incident is better understood as an event that occurred in the wake of the American Revolution, when the British Empire was being reconfigured on a global scale, and when moral obligations had attained a newfound, as Walvin would say, “immediacy.” If American independence implied that England had systematically exercised unjust political power, then the *Zong* ordeal served as visceral proof of inhumane actions

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<sup>83</sup> Walvin, *Zong: A Massacre*, 166.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

perpetrated by Englishmen. It was no longer disputable that brutal illiberality could in fact transpire under the tutelage of nation perceived as inherently good.

Norbert Elias's concept of a "threshold of shame" is again relevant in consideration of the *Zong* massacre. This threshold – which aptly encapsulated England's evolving attitude toward Empire in the 1780s – would have only widened further at the behest of the *Zong*. "The tendency to dwell on the moral character of the empire," notes Brown, "would be a lasting consequence of the American war."<sup>88</sup> Indeed, it was this very mentality that sparked public awareness of injustices perpetrated in India. In the years after the American Revolution, "the treatment of native populations on the subcontinent became the subject of sustained official questioning."<sup>89</sup> Heightened worries over the treatment of Indian subjects emanated from the same instinct that was propelling antislavery sentiment forward. Traditional images of Africans and Indians, while different in specifics, shared the same lens of national superiority that justified suspect imperial ventures. Indeed, it was this basic attitude that allowed the English to conceive of slavery as "a peculiarly American vice,"<sup>90</sup> which carried the dual implication of English rectitude and colonial sin. If the American Revolution casted doubts on England's national rectitude, then the *Zong* massacre corroborated these concerns, in effect underscoring the need to exemplify political righteousness and reformulate imperial ideology.

The desire for such a reformulation is evident in a widely read 1784 essay, entitled, *An essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves in the British Sugar*

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<sup>88</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 202.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 117.

*Colonies*. The author, James Ramsay, was a former ship's surgeon and Anglican priest who had traveled through the West and witnessed slavery's cruelty on a firsthand basis. In this essay, published a year after the *Zong* massacre, Ramsay exhorted his countrymen to renounce the slave trade: "But when the English, a nation most highly favoured of liberty, is viewed as taking the lead in this odious traffic... freedom must blush indignantly, while humanity mourns over the reproachful tale."<sup>91</sup> In bemoaning the incongruence of English liberty with the English slave trade, Ramsay drew a connection between English liberty and other lofty philosophical ideals, like "freedom" and "humanity." From the beginning, Ramsay left no room for doubt about this essay's underlying aim: "humanity... not reputation."<sup>92</sup> The Anglican priest perceived his moral duty – and by extension, his national duty – as one of atonement, with his ethical vision working to ameliorate imperial sins. By and large he was successful. As Walvin notes, Ramsay's 1784 essay was "an important abolitionist tract" in the years to follow.<sup>93</sup>

However, the substance of Ramsay's argument requires further qualification. Even though he advocated for the abolition of the English slave trade, Ramsay's 1784 essay did not advance unabashed emancipationist viewpoints. Rather, the clergyman's primary aim was to improve conditions for enslaved Africans, rather than fundamentally restructure racial relations in the West Indies. "What here is claimed for them [slaves]?" Ramsay rhetorically asked at the beginning of his essay. "Not bounties, or gifts from parliament, or people; but leave to become more useful to themselves, their masters, and

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<sup>91</sup> Ramsay, James. *An essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves in the British sugar colonies. By the Reverend James Ramsay, M.A. vicar of Teston, in Kent.* London, M.DCC.LXXXIV. [1784]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Claremont College Library. 34.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.

<sup>93</sup> Walvin, *Zong: A Massacre*, 177.

the state.”<sup>94</sup> Proselytization was Ramsay’s envisioned method to improve the living conditions for slaves in the West Indies. According to the Anglican priest, any given slaveholder was “bound to extend his care to the security of their [slaves] eternal happiness, by instructing them in the relation which they bear to the great Author of their being, and gracious Redeemer of their souls.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, Ramsay’s previous comments on “freedom” and “humanity” were of a specific sort, namely, a Christianized form of bondage, wherein freedom would be attained in the afterlife, and humanity realized in the non-human sphere. In articulating this argument, Ramsay compared French-owned slaves (who were successfully converted to Christianity) with heathen English slaves. “The French slave,” claimed Ramsay, “is placed above the sollicitations of hunger; and respecting his behavior, has, to the dread of pain, superadded, as a guide, the hopes and fears of religion, and the approbation and displeasure of his priest.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, for Ramsay, the introduction of Christianity not only improved the temporal and spiritual welfare of slaves. It also, conveniently, created docility. In Ramsay’s calculations, we see the same strain of logic that informed the methodology of the SPG. The moral calculus of imperial conduct was deeply imbued by the missionary impulse, perhaps because proselytization was practically unimpeachable in its noble intent. Furthermore, we once again see how the Christianization of slaves functioned as a compromise between unequivocal abolitionism and proslavery mentalities.

Even if Ramsay failed to proffer arguments for full abolitionism, he nonetheless intimated egalitarian sentiments that stood out against traditional ideas of ethnic

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<sup>94</sup> Ramsay, *An essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves*, V.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

superiority. He dedicated an entire chapter to disproving claims of racial superiority, entitled, *Natural Capacity of African Slaves Vindicated*. In this section, Ramsay said that, “...every possible collateral evidence of history, tradition, national manners, and customs, assures us that men had one common ancestor.”<sup>97</sup> Ramsay’s assiduous denial of Anglo-Saxon superiority appeared at odds with some of his other suggestions, particularly his tacit support for slavery *if* Christianity were spread amongst slave populations. After all, if humans were fundamentally equal, how could human bondage justly persist, regardless of religious factors?

In addressing this question, we must consider two possible situations. First, Ramsay’s tone suggests that he was not disinclined toward pragmatism. He therefore recognized the futility of any radical propositions. Second, celestial equality did not necessarily translate to temporal equality. Men could – and still can – recognize the inherent likeness of all human beings while simultaneously disavowing the imperative to systematically institute conditions of justice and equality. As Hutton says, for the composition of a *Histoire des Mentalités*, “The task is to establish the mental horizons of an age – not only as these open upon the future, but also as they delimit the possibilities of thought in a given historical era.”<sup>98</sup> Perhaps then, in the world of the eighteenth century, the institutionalization of full equality between different racial groups was not only an untenable proposition, but an unconceivable idea.

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<sup>97</sup> Ramsay, *An essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves*, 206.

<sup>98</sup> Hutton, “The History of Mentalities,” 242.

### Concluding Thoughts

Regardless of structural limitations on abolitionism's scope, antislavery sentiment attained new heights in the years after the Revolutionary War. In 1787, an assortment of English men and women, many prominent Evangelicals already involved in social reformation movements, formed the *Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Their aims were straightforward: convince the English public of slavery's horrors, and cajole Parliament into abolishing the slave trade. Only a year later, lawmakers passed the Slave Trade Act of 1788, which limited the number of slaves that could be transported on one slave trading vessel. This law was renewed and extended in the 1790s, but the *Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* continued fighting for total abolition of England's slave trading industry. With the continual growth of public support and William Wilberforce's stalwart presence in Parliament, the *Society's* efforts succeeded with the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the first real step in the demise of European slavery in the Americas.

This thesis's task has been to chart the mental horizons of antislavery's growth in the English speaking world through the eighteenth century. My aim was to render a descriptive account of abolitionist sentiment, rather than establish definitive causal bases. I have sought a taxonomical survey of conceptual schema and institutional mechanisms that mediated and redefined ideas of English identity in their relation to slavery. Admittedly, the instinct that initially led me to examine identity now leads me to think that the process of identity reformulation in fact constitutes a fundamental area of causality in the structural trajectory of human society.

In light of *Longue Durée*'s pertinence, we should recognize that antislavery sentiment is, in a sense, timeless. Countless colonists and travelers expressed horror over slavery, from the time it was first instituted in the New World. Slavery's visceral cruelty was experienced by observers at an instinctual level. The raw element of the human psyche frowns upon human bondage, for no other species in the animal kingdom systematically subjugates its fellow brothers and sisters. Slavery as such is the institutional embodiment of humankind's growing pains; the sheer primal lurch towards power and self-interest coming into conflict with ethical imperatives that, relatively speaking, were constructed at an astounding rate. Only some 11,000 years separated the advent of sedentary agrarian communities from modern Europe's rejection of slavery. Such a timespan appears minuscule in comparison to the millions of years during which earthly organisms evolved, always directed by a will to survive, which seemingly transmogrified into a will to power with the development of organized society.

Once again, an *Annales* historian can help unmask the complex structural underpinnings of man's mental universe. Lucien Febvre, cofounder of the *Annales School*, suggested "...there is an "historical curve" in collective psychology, extending from primitive society, in which emotional life (organized through myth and ritual) stands at the center of culture, toward modern society, in which intellectual activity crowds emotional life toward the periphery."<sup>99</sup> Assuming that "intellectual activity" pertains to the organizational improvement of material conditions, then transatlantic slavery – in its rationalization and dehumanization of economic production – represents the ethical nadir of Western society's advancement into modernity. Conversely, we might

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<sup>99</sup> Hutton, "The History of Mentalities," 243.



understand the immutability of antislavery sentiment as Febvre's "emotional life" reasserting itself into the economic realm of human activity, which has increasingly monopolized the social life of human society as human society has grown more technologically advanced.

The evolution of an English antislavery identity depended on many political, economic, and social developments that had no direct bearing on slavery. This, I believe, is the value of my methodological approach. That is, through the prism of identity, one attains a clearer understanding of how English society's structural underpinnings functioned and evolved, at the institutional and ideological level. Understanding this interplay is critical, since the development of an English antislavery identity was engendered through the interdependency of institutional action and ideological propagation. Norbert Elias perceived this process as the mutually constitutive relationship between psychological conditions and social realities. According to Hutton, "He [Elias] argues that man is a creator of forms, and that these forms lend structure to his feelings as well as to his social relationships. Such forms constitute a grid which meshes all of his psychological and social relationships. Psychological and social processes thus mirror one another, and interpretations of them are interchangeable."<sup>100</sup> In the case of an English antislavery identity, Elias's "forms" were the guiding ideological principles of English discourse, which took on new meaning as structural conditions realigned. Liberty, empire, governance, monarchy, race, God, and economy were just a few of the "forms" that framed perceptions of national identity, and thus seeped into the Englishman's understanding of himself and colonial slavery.

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<sup>100</sup> Hutton, "The History of Mentalities," 247.

The conceptual terms that underlay the missionary impulse translated into organizational action, in the form of the SPG and other proselytizing bodies. With the Georgia Colony in the 1730s and Quaker antislavery movement of the 1750s and 1760s, religious obligations and moral principles directly affected organizational actions. In the case of Anthony Benezet, Granville Sharp, and other antislavery thinkers, the propagation of philosophical paradigms provided a conceptual foundation for the legalization of positive change, as shown in the *Somerset Case*. And of course, the American Revolution upended and redefined the ideological landscape that constituted a common understanding of what it meant to be English. This momentous upheaval energized antislavery sentiment, paving the way for the gradual adoption of a new English identity that not only prided itself on antislavery advocacy, but which recognized the growing need for political and ethical oversight of transnational imperial affairs.

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